ART meets science in Liquid Order, the title of the plaza adjacent to the Engineering Graduate Research Center on NC State University's Centennial Campus. Designed by Jun Kaneko, the plaza pattern speaks to the power of investigation and research, change and growth, and the complexity found in simple things.

Kaneko says,

ENGINEERING

IS ABOUT FINDING LOGIC AND RULES OUT OF APPARENT CHAOS. BUT BEHIND THAT IS CREATIVE IMAGINATION.

ACCIDENTS ARE OFTEN THE FOUNDATION FOR DISCOVERIES IN RESEARCH. IT IS IDENTICAL TO THE WAY AN ARTIST WORKS.
In March 1992, Kaneko met with engineering college faculty, staff, and students to discover the kinds of work that would be taking place in the EGRC building. Adding those observations and conversations to his lifetime of studying the rhythms and patterns in nature, Kaneko developed our plaza’s pattern to reveal essential qualities of order and chaos and to point out the importance of improvisation, accidents, and the seemingly obvious to research and invention.

The idea of turning the plaza itself into art came from the university master plan. The master plan describes the campus as a collection of academic neighborhoods, with each neighborhood having at its center a shared common space that is unique and identifiable. Each neighborhood will be people-centered, safe, accessible, and beautiful, with places to stimulate creativity and cross-discipline dialogue.

The 120-by-200-foot plaza provides common space for the first of 12 planned building clusters on Centennial Campus. Campus planners conceived the plaza as a hard-surfaced, formal space to serve as a location for ceremonies and other organized gatherings. Because of this anticipated use, artists were asked to make proposals that would leave the plaza open and not blocked by permanent seating or other objects.

Liquid Order was completed in March 1997. The approximately 108,000 brick pavers were manufactured by Taylor Clay Products, specified by the artist, and laid according to his plans by Fred Adams Paving Company.

Our campus goals are to create spaces between, to animate open spaces. The plaza is going to be provocative and that’s good.

Abie Harris
University Architect

The plaza as a carefully conceived space is an ancient human concept. The archeological remains of early settlements show that open spaces, a square or commons within protective boundaries, were important features of planned communities. The plaza, used as a public meeting place for politics, business, and community gatherings, appears in Athens as the Agora and in Rome as the Forum.

The Romans, rational engineers and planners that they were, created more than one public space within each city—a market, a forum and carefully measured and laid out streets. These public spaces enabled them to create a particular order to community life.

The Forbidden City of Ming Dynasty China is a sequence of connected formal open plazas within walls—the walls of the palace and the city of Beijing. These plazas echo the courtyard house typical of the Chinese whether in city or country—the domestic courtyard being a place of ultimate privacy.

What these examples suggest is that a plaza, as an open space within walls, halls, streets, or buildings is a luxury and a necessity. The open space—square, rectangular, sometimes circular—is an organizing element and an opportunity for relief from the density of urban living.

Squares, plazas, parks, commons, malls, and terraces are all thematic derivatives of the original open space. Complex layers of meaning that time and use, habit and tradition, location and architectural definition can layer onto a plaza are matched by the intensely personal experiences that each person brings to these important spaces.

... the plaza is an abstraction, a bright container for diverse experience

Michael Reynolds
Professor
NC State University

Once you understand the rules, the problem becomes less interesting.

Jun Kaneko
Artist
Kaneko’s Plaza, Now and Then

As the plane begins the downwind leg of its landing pattern, glass curtained buildings rise up across the river. Somewhere among those buildings lives the artist, Jun Kaneko, whose design work has brought me to Omaha. Below, a rolling and irregular plain is neatly boxed by perfectly regular squares of roads and fence lines. I cannot tell if this imposed grid, which runs to the horizon, controls the terrain, or is controlled by it. With my seat in its upright position, lap belt fastened, I am soothed by the familiar routine: jolt of landing gear; flaps extending. Like you, my heart leaps up in my throat when that routine varies. Let the pilot add power when we are locked in the groove, and my pulse increases.

And like you, I am soothed when life seems to proceed in an orderly way, Monday leading to Tuesday without fail. Within the grid lines of hours, days, months, I continually try to impose minor forms of order on my life: arrange books; match socks; balance accounts. In my closet I make ephemeral arrangements: shoes below shirts, coats to the right, for there’s nothing like symmetry to calm the eye and ease a ragged heart. God knows we are addicts: right angles proliferate as we fix balancing points and make parallax corrections—a door here, a window there. We’ve been doing it for a long time now: pyramids, Parthenon, Pantheon, Versailles, and these less grand but no less regular buildings with which we surround ourselves, those on the now distant Omaha skyline, others across this campus which we call by name—Holladay, Caldwell, Page, Ricks—dependable as old friends. We build them in regular ways, and they give our lives the kinds of order we require. It is all as pleasant as port. And yet . . .

I am a biographer, but this is no biography. That Omaha evening, I am standing beside Kaneko, watching him sharpen three Japanese kitchen knives, which he has laid out on the counter with operating room precision, their dark steel opening on to bright edges. Wedged across the steel sink a wooden carriage centers his brown whetstone under the dripping faucet. As the artist begins to hone them, blade by blade, we talk about this plaza, which is at that moment no more than lines on paper, a vision without substance. Jun speaks with the same consideration with which he hones: nothing is hurried, the rhythm is even, small nuances become important. Later I will realize that his blade work, his artwork, and his life are of a piece, where attention to precise detail is the control which allows incremental risks to be taken.

As he begins to slice supper ingredients to simmer in kelp broth, we speak of surfaces, pattern and scale. His are ceramic; mine are printed words on paper. On the wooden prep surface, shiitake mushrooms, cubes of salmon, tofu, green onions, and peeled shrimp form patterns as we speak. No two ingredients are sliced exactly the same; green onion rests against pink salmon. The plaza he knows to be a risk, a large public surface filled with accidental elements: shadows will move across it by day; seasonal light will vary; rain will darken the brick work. It is a huge surface. Walking across it will be one experience. Looking down on it from the framing buildings will be quite another. He cannot control these variables, but neither can he ignore them in his planning. In the chafing dish, sliced ingredients begin to change color, melt and mingle in the broth. Tonight Jun cooks for five, but two others arrive unexpected: no one goes hungry.

The next morning we begin to explore the old building he has renovated. In the rear of one floor stand three hand-built kilns, one so large we can walk into it. Computer programs control the firing, cutting one more variable to the bone. Another floor is dedicated to the formation of the clay. Here, Jun’s apprentices spend their first year, maybe two, doing nothing more complex than kneading, rolling, pounding clay into flat forms, ready for his use. The unfired clay forms at various stages of drying will, eight years from now, form a wall in Boston’s renovation of the Atrium metro stop. Half a world away, in his Japanese studio, larger

Michael Reynolds
NC State University

Because of his keen interest in the relationship between art and science, Michael Reynolds was commissioned by the North Carolina Arts Council to write an essay about the plaza that might add to our enjoyment of Kaneko’s art and be another example of interdisciplinary dialogue. Reynolds is Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Studies in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences and Professor of English at NC State University. His story, Kaneko’s Plaza, Now and Then was written in 1995.

What causes an idea to materialize in one’s brain? What happens when you see one image and it then changes to become another? What happens in between the stopping and the starting?

“Liquid Order” speaks to the value of disruptions in apparent plans and to the rigor of imagination. Accidents are often the foundation for discoveries in research. Work and play have a keen interrelationship. Magic and mystery and movement.

Less order. More spontaneity.
works, drying now for several months, will soon be ready for his brush. With Jun, patience is not a virtue, it is a given, as elemental as light or air.

His surfaces I have studied in magazines and have seen at one exhibit, but I am not prepared for the gallery floor of his building. Whatever I thought I knew about Jun’s work becomes irrelevant the moment he turns on the lights. Standing in rows, his large and small “dangos” are so stunning that I forget to breathe. These “dumplings,” some no larger than a stool, some looming above me, all come together.

Simple, elegant forms with patterned surfaces, smooth, glazed, lovely, I am looking at the life of the artist. As one pattern modulates across rows of “dangos” — color varies, lines thicken — there is fixity and change, stasis and flux, the old problem renewed.

I do not know what Jun sees when he enters that gallery or when he looks down on this plaza below us, but I see my life writ large.

When I can speak again, I ask about the development of his patterns, and the problem of scale. Pattern, for Jun, is not decorating a surface; pattern is the surface. His black dots floating on the bone white background seem to cast slight shadows where the black has run in the firing. On a smaller “dango” the dots are also smaller, the shadows less, but Jun has not scaled the dots and the surface up or down in the same proportion. Doubling the height of the “dango” does not necessarily double the size of the dot nor the space between dots. It is like cooking: if you double the volume, you may not want to double the seasoning. How does he know when it’s right? I cannot tell you, nor can I explain how I know when a paragraph’s structure is right. As with cooking, the cook controls what he can, but there is always an element of surprise, an accident that cannot be duplicated. When the artist is as one with his material, when form and scale are perfectly matched, then we have what we cannot predict, a result that exceeds the imagination.

As we speak, walking slowly through the glazed rows, I see patterns develop — spirals, hatching, and dots — and looking down on this plaza, which exists as I write only in my mind, I see both continuity and difference. This plaza is like nothing Jun Kaneko has created previously, and yet it needs no signature to claim it as his own. In preliminary sketches, he worked with patterns he knew by heart, old friends. What developed was more complex, patterns within a pattern, flow across space disrupted, reformed. Here old patterns culminate into something rich and various, catching us unprepared, uneasy. Here every order breaks down, regroups to break again. Up against these arcaded walls whose classical spacing comforts us with quiet order, this plaza is fletched like an arrow, tense on a tightly strung bow. Ride your eye round it, slowly take it in, for it tells you a story you may not want to know, a story you’ve heard before, a simple story as obvious as the need to resharpen knives. And yet . . .

In the application room, tools are laid out on a table, exactly but casually, not for inspection but for use. The same may be said of any part of Jun’s building. Kitchen knives or shaping blades: as above, so below. Here nothing is wasted, neither material nor motion, neither space nor time. Every such order, no matter how well tended, is vulnerable. This one is crazed by intruding phone calls and urgent faxes. An unexpected virus can rearrange months of work. Elsewhere, my perfectly matched socks last maybe a week, sometimes two. The Roman market at Aquila lasted longer, but its arcades eventually went under the earth. When I was younger, this recognition so depressed me that October leaves falling into the lawn’s lap were reason to mourn. Older today, I mourn for many reasons, but not for disorder, not for change. Something about us wants both order and its antithesis, wants imposed symmetries but not without disruptions. The first without the second would be
boring; the second, alone, would be unbearable. On
the plaza below us, we have them both — patterned
order and disruptive intrusion.

Before I leave Omaha the mild fall weather has disapp-pearead as the first snow flurries of winter blow into
town. During the three day visit, Jun has suffered my
probing without apparent discomfort, answering with
questions of his own. We work in different mediums,
but not so differently. The process, his and mine, is
discussible. Begin with the question; explore possible
solutions; choose intuitively the most satisfying
answer; build the piece, which is the best one can do
at that moment. In his studio, in his gallery, across his
kitchen table, Jun and I have named all the parts:
medium, form, pattern, surface, scale, density. We
have said all but the unsayable: what does it mean?
Jun does not explain himself. Nor should he. For the
artist, the pleasure is in the process, in the making of
the piece, in the discovery of its final form. All that
remains to complete the circle is the eye of the
beholder, the necessary other. You and I must give the
plaza meaning.

Three months later, I am in my studio, surrounded
by books, file drawers, photographs, and microfilm,
not so orderly as Jun’s space, but probably an accu-
rate metaphor. On the near wall I have pinned a line
drawing of the plaza that we contemplate today. I am
thinking of you, my reader and Jun’s audience, trying
to find words to say more clearly what I have been
trying to tell you in every paragraph. I cannot explain
what the plaza means to you; all I can say is what it
means to me, for the plaza is an abstraction, a bright
container for diverse experience, a changing space
that will be different for you ten years from now.
In odd angles of the world, we have seen this plaza
many times before. Look at it one way and see huge
descending stairs; look at it differently to see crys-
talline structures exposed by an electron microscope.
Stop at the mountain road cut to look carefully at the
exposed striations. Sit beside me at my father’s draft-
ing table where he shows the boy a faulted geologic
cross section a mile beneath the surface. Look larger

Kaneko relishes the dialogue
between unpredictability and
order. Straight lines order our
lives: longitude and latitude,
for example, or the yellow line
in the middle of the road . . .
Kaneko has taken the visual
device of straight lines and frac-
tured it like the microscopic
structure of metal or the geologic
folds of the earth.

Kaneko uses pattern to talk
about order and chaos, about
the intuitive and the rational,
about paradoxical logic, and
about the importance of improvi-
sation and accidents to research
and invention.

“There is no music if there is no
silence.” Kaneko says of time
and space in the in-between.
“Look at the pattern of light
and shade. Marks and the
spaces between marks are basic
to the natural order.”
About the Artist
Jun Kaneko is an internationally recognized artist, born in Nagoya, Japan in 1942. Educated at the California Institute of Art and the Chouinard Art Institute, Kaneko lives part of each year in the United States and Japan. He taught for many years at the Rhode Island School of Design and Cranbrook Academy before moving his studio to Omaha, Nebraska. In 1996 Kaneko was inducted into the American Crafts Council's prestigious College of Fellows. He has received numerous public art commissions and fellowships.

About Artworks for State Buildings
Between 1989 and 1995 the State of North Carolina commissioned artworks using one-half of one percent of a state building's construction budget. Called Artworks for State Buildings, the program was modeled on similar legislation in 27 other states and many U.S. and European cities. Artworks in each N.C. case were commissioned in response to the particular community's needs. The program is managed by the North Carolina Arts Council.

When asked how a person might experience the plaza, Kaneko concludes, “Everyone's experience will be different. Something about the taste of food on the tongue... I hope people will just walk around and around on it... I see pathways in the plaza. I see it as an interesting place to walk.”

Artworks for State Buildings Selection Panel
Dr. Charlotte V. Brown, Director, Visual Arts Center, NC State University
Marley Carroll, FAIA, Architect, Odell Associates
Edwin F. Harris, Jr., FAIA, University Architect, NC State University
Perry Howard, Head, Department of Landscape Architecture, NC A&T University
Laura Sindell, Artist

Artworks for State Buildings Committee
Harley F. Shuford, Jr., Chairman (1987–1993), North Carolina Arts Council
Marley Carroll, Designer
Edwin F. Harris, Jr., Principal User
Claude Howell, Citizen Appointee
Susie Powell, Citizen Appointee

North Carolina Arts Council
Margaret S. Newman, Chairman (1993–present)
Mary B. Regan, Executive Director
Jean W. McLaughlin, Director, Artworks for State Buildings Collection

NC Department of Cultural Resources
Secretary Betty Ray McCalin, 1993–present
Secretary Patric Dorsey, 1985–1993

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Dr. Larry K. Monteith, Chancellor
Dr. Nino A. Masnari, Dean, College of Engineering
David J. Lombardi, Building Construction and Management Specialist, College of Engineering

State of North Carolina
James G. Martin, Governor, 1985–1993
James B. Hunt, Governor, 1993–present

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